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XX. THE MEANING OF *ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL*

The poet needs a ground in popular tradition on which he may work, and which, again, may restrain his art within the due temperance. It holds him to the people, supplies a foundation for his edifice, and in furnishing so much work done to his hand, leaves him at leisure and in full strength for the audacities of his imagination. (Emerson, Essay on Shakspeare, in *Representative Men*)

It has often seemed strange to lovers of Shakspeare that the most genial of dramatists should have written plays which, while not attaining the horror and pathos of tragedy, arouse distaste and even repugnance. *Troilus and Cressida* and *Measure for Measure*, despite superb poetry and marvellous delineation of character, are so repellent in theme and treatment that they are seldom represented on the stage today, and seldom lie close to the affection of readers of Shakspeare. This is even more the case with *All's Well that Ends Well*. "Everyone who reads this play," says the editor of the *Arden Shakespeare* volume, "is at first shocked and perplexed by the revolting idea which underlies the plot . . . it leaves so unpleasant a flavour with some people that it is not tasted again."¹ Barrett Wendell put it even more strongly: "There is no other work of Shakspeare's which in conception and in temper seems quite so corrupt as this. . . . There are other works of Shakspeare which are more painful; there are none less pleasing, none on which one cares less to dwell."² The nature of the plot has kept *All's Well* almost completely from representation on the modern stage; Kemble, in his acting version, omitted the central episode of the main action altogether.

Not less disagreeable than the plot are many of the characters. Few people can "reconcile their hearts" to Bertram any more than could Dr. Johnson, who found him

¹ W. Osborne Brigstocke; Introduction to *All's Well*, p. xv.

² *William Shakspeare*, N. Y., 1901, p. 250.

"a man noble without generosity, and young without truth; who marries Helen as a coward, and leaves her as a profligate: when she is dead by his unkindness, sneaks home to a second marriage, is accused by a woman whom he has wronged, defends himself by falsehood, and is dismissed to happiness." The Clown is one of the least amusing and most foul-mouthed of Shakspeare's comic characters, even with all due license for Elizabethan looseness of language. Parolles is certainly a most unsavory fellow; generally accounted a kind of degraded Falstaff, without the fat knight's wit and charm. And Helena herself has aroused the sharpest condemnation, which may be contrasted with Coleridge's famous remark that she is Shakspeare's "loveliest character," or Hazlitt's contention that in her conduct "the most scrupulous nicety of female modesty is not once violated." Dunlop said of Helena that "considering the disparity of rank and fortune it was, perhaps, indelicate to demand as her husband a man from whom she had received no declaration nor proof of attachment; but she certainly overstepped all bounds of female decorum, in pertinaciously insisting on the celebration of a marriage to which he expressed such invincible repugnance . . . she ingratiates herself into the family of a rival, and contrives a stratagem, the success of which could have bound Bertram neither in law nor in honor."³ Andrew Lang, whose taste and common-sense need not be emphasized, wrote much the same thing in a more vivacious way. "Everyone would prefer to see the worm in the bud feed on the damask cheek rather than to see 'Venus toute entière à sa proie attachée', as Helena attaches herself to Bertram. A character in many ways so admirable is debased when Helena becomes a *crampon* Had Helena regained her lord in a more generous and seemly way, we would still have to pardon the original manner of the wooing."⁴ Lounsbury, in a criticism well worth reading, remarks "Nor can any excellence in Helen's

³ *History of Prose Fiction*, London, 1888, Vol. II, p. 86.

⁴ *Harper's Magazine*, Vol. LXXXV (1892) p. 213.

character counterbalance the fundamental fact that she has been untrue to her sex. She persistently pursues a man who is not merely indifferent but averse."⁵ John Masefield goes still further; he believes that Shakspeare deliberately meant to make Helena despicable. "Helena's obsession of love makes her blind to the results of her actions. She twice puts the man whom she loves into an intolerable position, which nothing but a king can end. The fantasy is not made so real that we can believe in the possibility of happiness between two so married. Helena has been praised as one of the noblest of Shakespeare's women. Shakespeare saw her more clearly than any man who has ever lived. He saw her as a woman who practises a borrowed art, not for art's sake, nor for charity, but, woman fashion, for a selfish end. He saw her put a man into a position of ignominy quite unbearable, and then plot with other women to keep him in that position. Lastly, he saw her beloved all the time by the conventionally minded of both sexes."⁶

Even if we do not agree with Helena's detractors, the plot in which she has so prominent a part is difficult to reconcile with probability. The very title of the play may seem a misnomer. *Does all end well?* Can a marriage so arranged, an agreement between husband and wife so fulfilled, end happily? "The very nobility of Helena's nature," says Lowes, "renders the story which Shakespeare retained less plausible."⁷ "It needs all the dramatist's power to hold our sympathy and to force us to an unwilling assent to the title," remarks Neilson.⁸ Oliver Elton expresses a similar thought in a graceful sonnet.⁹

All's Well—Nay, Spirit, was it well that she
Thy clear-eyed favorite, the wise, the rare,
The 'rose of youth,' must her deep heart lay bare,
And Helen wait on Bertram's contumely?

⁵ *Shakespeare as Dramatist and Moralist*, N. Y. 1901, p. 390.

⁶ *William Shakespeare*, N. Y., 1911, p. 147 f.

⁷ Introduction to *All's Well*, Tudor Shakespeare, p. xiii.

⁸ Neilson and Thorndike, *The Facts about Shakespeare*, N. Y., 1913, p. 83.

⁹ *A Book of Homage to Shakespeare*, London, 1916, p. 161.

Must Love's own humble, dauntless devotee
 Make Night accomplice, and, a changeling, dare
 The loveless love-encounter, and prepare
 To tread the brink of shame? May all this be

And all end well?

On the other hand, if those who condemn Helena are right, if, in Andrew Lang's phrase, she is "the thief, not of love, but of lust," the chances for a really happy ending seem even smaller. And Bertram is quite as hard to explain psychologically as Helena. After treating his wife with the greatest harshness, setting what he believes impassable barriers to their union, engaging in an intrigue with another woman, and "boggling shrewdly" to lie himself out of a tight place, he is apparently transformed in the twinkling of an eye into a model husband.

If she, my liege, can make me know this clearly,
 I'll love her dearly, ever, ever, dearly.

But are things going to end well for Bertram any more than for Helena?

Many other features of the play might be cited which are unsatisfactory to modern feelings. There seems little need, however, to linger over these at present. Clearly, for us of today, *All's Well* perplexes more than it satisfies, and repels more than it attracts. The important thing for us to consider is how such a state of affairs has come about.

Two separate issues are involved in the attempt to answer this question: one, the effect of the play upon Shakspeare's audiences and readers; the other, its effect upon modern audiences and readers. These two points have been constantly confused. Shakspeare's marvellous power of making his creations seem real has misled many critics into judging their actions and dispositions as they would those of persons of their own century, or of a timeless immortality belonging to no century, instead of as Elizabethans in various disguises, with all the conventions and traditions of the days of the Virgin Queen. Transcendent as his genius was, it was in no sense independent of his time; on the contrary, it reflected

with fidelity the characteristics of his own day. His artistic methods were not those of a modern dramatist, nor were the reactions of an audience in the Globe Theater those of an audience today. Any criticism which fails to take account of these facts is bound to come to shipwreck sooner or later.

Most explanations of the alleged faulty psychology of the play, and of its disagreeable tone, completely ignore differences between Elizabethan and modern conditions. The reader will find the much-venerated Gervinus treating the whole piece as a moral allegory on the theme that "merit goes before rank."¹⁰ In allegory, of course, one expects some violence to reason and probability. He will find Dr. Johnson, on the other hand, arguing that Shakspeare "sacrificed virtue to convenience," and in his desire to please, wrote with no moral purpose whatever. He will find Raleigh¹¹ and Schücking¹² attributing the apparent psychological shortcomings of the play to Shakspeare's carelessness or creative opulence, "a part of his magnanimity, and a testimony to his boundless resource." Elton believes that the solution lies in remembering that love is not governed by reason, and that nature works in a wonderful way. In the closing lines of the sonnet from which quotation has already been made, Shakspeare defends his work thus:

That Spirit, from his seat
Elysian, seems to murmur: 'Sometimes know
In Love's unreason hidden, Nature's voice;
In Love's resolve, Her will; and though his feet
Walk by wild ways precipitous, yet, so
Love's self be true, Love may at last rejoice.'

Seccomb and Allen frankly give up the problem: "The plot is a fanciful imbroglio, and the situations, even when they seem most threatening, have no more reality than arabesques; to regard the characters too seriously is merely to court delusion."¹³

¹⁰ *Shakespeare Commentaries*, tr. by F. E. Bunnett, N. Y., 1875, p. 180.

¹¹ *Shakespeare* (English Men of Letters) N. Y., 1907, p. 140.

¹² *Die Charakterprobleme bei Shakespeare*. Leipzig, 1919, pp. 196 ff.

¹³ *Age of Shakespeare*, London, 1903, Vol. II, pp. 81 f.

The object of the following pages is to examine *All's Well* from the point of view of Elizabethan story-telling and Elizabethan social conventions. Widespread and favorite narrative material forms the basis of the main plot; by studying this material we may gain some idea of its probable effect when put into dramatic form. We say that the play is disagreeable, but it was at all events liked well enough to be subjected to a process of revision, which shows clearly a lapse of time, and, in the alterations, the deepening of interest in character which marks Shakspeare's later years.¹⁴ A play that found no favor would hardly have been so treated. Again, it is necessary to observe how far the supposedly disagreeable qualities are inherent in the story, and how far they are due to Shakspeare, or heightened by him. Before we can accuse Shakspeare, as Barrett Wendell did, of "treating the fact of love with a cynical irony almost worthy of a modern Frenchman," we must be sure that the seemingly ironical quality in his work is not susceptible of another explanation. We must reckon with a very different attitude towards moral issues, and a different popular psychology, and we must pay particular attention to what was liked on the stage at the time when *All's Well* was written. Moreover, the artistic quality of a piece on the stage, as of a picture on canvas, is often heightened by deepening the shadows; may it not be true that some of the gloom of the play is for dramatic effect?

¹⁴ The most thorough study of this process of revision has been made by Professor J. L. Lowes, to whom I am indebted for friendly counsel. Through his kindness, I have been privileged to examine the unpublished MS. of this study, and to utilize some of its results here. It is noteworthy, in connection with the point made above, that according to Professor Lowes, Bertram, the most unpleasant character in the main plot, was not retouched. The chief alterations made Helena more womanly and less girlish. Some of the conclusions of Professor Lowes are summarized in his edition of the play for the *Tudor Shakespeare* (pp. vii ff.). He believes that the play was first written "from 1598 to 1600 or 1601," and worked over "at a date very near that of the latest tragedies, and not long (if at all) before the Romances—say 1606-1608."

The final results of a critical examination of *All's Well* from this point of view are striking. I think it will be clear that Helena was meant by Shakspeare to be wholly noble and heroic, and fully justified in her conduct, both in the winning of Bertram and in the manner of fulfilling his conditions for their union after marriage; that the sudden transformation of Bertram from a villain into a model husband was a convention of medieval and Elizabethan story-telling, which must be expected to follow Helena's triumph; that the blackening of the "hero" and the disagreeable qualities in the Clown and Parolles are explainable for reasons of dramatic contrast and dramatic motivation. It has already been suggested briefly by Thorndike that in the choice and treatment of the themes of the "problem plays" Shakspeare was much affected by contemporary literary fashions, on the stage and elsewhere; I hope to make this suggestion seem doubly convincing. I do not seek to prove that the play is a pleasant one, or that it seemed so to the playgoers for whom Shakspeare wrote. But I do believe that it is far more unsavory to us than it was to them, and that the effect which it was intended to create has been generally misunderstood. In the last analysis, I believe that it reveals quite the reverse of the pessimism with which it has so often been reproached, and justifies the conviction that Shakspeare is here, as elsewhere, fundamentally optimistic.

Such a study as is here proposed will perform a greater service, if successful, than for this one play alone. It will help to clear up puzzling questions in the sister comedies, *Measure for Measure* and *Troilus and Cressida*, which, with *Hamlet*, have been often called "problem plays." These may not be favorites (with the exception of *Hamlet*, of course), but they are all extraordinary dramatic achievements, written at the height of Shakspeare's powers, and significant for the light which they throw upon his other work. Through an understanding of the effect of these pieces upon the audiences for whom they were designed, we

shall be in a position to appreciate more justly the Roman plays and the supreme achievement of the great tragedies.

I

HELENA AND BERTRAM: THE FULFILMENT OF THE TASKS

The best approach to an understanding of *All's Well* from the Elizabethan point of view is through an examination of the character of Helena. The two chief indictments against her, as we have seen, are that she forces Bertram into a marriage against his will, and that she makes use of unsavory trickery to compel him, once more against his will, to receive her as his wife. We will consider for the present the second indictment, since this forms the chief theme of Shakspeare's play.

The main plot of *All's Well* is based on the ninth novel of the third day of the *Decameron*, which Shakspeare in all probability got from the faithful translation in Paynter's *Palace of Pleasure*.¹⁵ In brief, the story as told by Paynter is as follows:

Giletta, the daughter of Gerardo of Narbona, physician to the Count of Rossiglione, fell deeply in love with the Count's son Beltramo. Upon the death of the Count, Beltramo went to Paris, whither Giletta followed him. The King of France was suffering from an illness which no one could cure; Giletta offered to heal him, and if unsuccessful, to submit to being burnt alive. The King proposed, in case the cure were complete, to give her in marriage to some worthy gentleman, to which she assented, reserving, however, the right of choice for herself. The King was healed, whereupon Giletta

¹⁵ It does not seem likely that both Shakspeare and Paynter would independently have called the people of Sienna "the Senois." Attempts have been made to show that Shakspeare used the *Virginia* of Bernardo Accolti (eds. 1513, 1535), an Italian tragi-comedy based on Boccaccio. Cf. Klein, *Geschichte des Dramas*, Leipzig, 1866, IV., 546-589; Bodenstedt, ed. Shakspeare, Leipzig, 1871, XXXIV, v-xii; H. von der Hagen, *Über die altfranzösische Vorstufe des Shakespear'schen Lustspiels Ende Gut, Alles Gut*. Halle diss. Gaston Paris (*Romania*, VIII, 636) does not think that Hagen has made out a case for the dependence of Shakspeare upon Accolti. Lowes (*Tudor Shakspeare*, p. x) says that "the evidence for it is entirely unconvincing." In the present study no further mention will be made of Accolti's play.

demanded Beltramo as husband. The young count, "knowing her not to be of a stocke convenable to his nobilitie," objected, but the King insisted that the marriage be celebrated. After this was over, the Count obtained permission to return to his own country, but instead went to Tuscany, and entered the service of the Florentines against the people of Sienna (the Senois). Giletta returned to Rossiglione, where she set the Count's affairs in order, and then sent two knights to tell him that if it were on her account that he was absenting himself from home, she would herself leave. He replied that she might do as she pleased; that he did not purpose to live with her until she should get upon her finger a ring which he wore, and have a son begotten by him. When this reply was made known to Giletta, she told it to the chief men of Rossiglione, and said that she was unworthy to cause the exile of the Count, and that her purpose was to spend the rest of her life in pilgrimages and devotions. She then made her way to Florence, and lodged in the house of a poor widow. The widow told her that Beltramo was in love with the daughter of a gentlewoman of the city, a neighbor. Giletta went to this gentlewoman, and telling the whole story of her marriage, proposed that the daughter should consent to the Count's advances, and demand his ring as a pledge, while she herself should take the daughter's place in bed, and so, by the grace of God, be got with child. So the affair was arranged. The gentlewoman and her daughter were rewarded with a large sum for the latter's dowry, and rich jewels, and thereupon retired into the country. Beltramo, being called home by his subjects, and hearing that Giletta had left, returned to Rossiglione. Giletta stayed on in Florence, where two sons were born to her. After causing them "carefullie to be noursed and brought up," she repaired to Montpellier, where Beltramo, on All Saints Day, was entertaining many knights and ladies at a great feast. In pilgrim's weeds, Giletta entered the hall, her two sons in her arms, and made herself known to her husband, showing him his ring, and claiming the fulfilment of his conditions. The Count asked her to tell how it had come to pass, and she related the whole story. "For whiche cause the counte knowyng the thynges she she had spoken to be true (and perceyving her constaunt minde and good witte, and the twoo faier yonge boies to kepe his promise made, and to please his subjectes, and the ladies that made sute unto him, to accept her from that time forthe as his lawfull wife, and to honour her) abjected his obstinate rigour: causyng her to rise up, and imbraced and kissed her, acknowledgyng her againe for his lawfull wife . . . and from that tyme forthe, he loved and honoured her, as his dere spouse and wife."

Shakspeare altered many details of this story,¹⁶ and made it more elaborate by the introduction of Parolles and the

¹⁶ For the reader's convenience, I quote the following from Lowes's edition of the play: "The Countess, Parolles, the Clown and Lafeu are all added; Giletta of the story is rich, has refused many suitors, and has kins-

sub-plot, of the Countess and the Clown and Lafeu, and of a second ring in the final episode. Compared with the ending of the tale, Shakspeare's fifth act is exceedingly complicated.

The main theme of the Boccaccio *novella* enjoyed in the Middle Ages considerable popularity, to which its various forms in prose and verse bear witness. There are many analogous stories which are instructive in forming conclusions as to its significance. This theme is briefly as follows: A wife is deserted by her husband, to be taken back on the fulfilment of apparently impossible conditions, one of which is to get a child by him. She performs these tasks, and wins her husband.¹⁷

folk of her own; on her arrival in Paris, her first step is to see Beltramo; the King and not Giletta suggests as her reward the bestowal upon her of a husband, whom Giletta merely requests, thereupon, that she may choose; the choice of Beltramo is not made in his presence, but he is called in later to hear of it; after Beltramo's desertion (which is not motivated beforehand, as in the play), Giletta returns to Rossiglione, and devotes herself to the care and improvement of Beltramo's estate, rendering herself greatly beloved by his subjects; as Beltramo does not return, Giletta sends him word that she is willing to leave Rossiglione, should that insure his return, and it is in reply to this message of Giletta that Beltramo writes his letter; when Giletta leaves, she does so publicly, telling her subjects that she has determined to spend the rest of her days in pilgrimages and devotion; the widow at whose house she stays in Florence is not Diana's mother, but a neighbor of her mother, who is also a widow and a gentlewoman; Giletta remains in Florence, after Beltramo has returned home, until the birth of twin sons; in the dénouement neither Diana nor the King is present, but Giletta simply appears, in poor apparel, with her two sons in her arms, at a feast which Beltramo is giving, and weeping, claims her rights; there is no mention whatever of a second ring." Professor Lowes is in error in saying that Beltramo's desertion is not motivated beforehand; it is clearly due to Giletta's lower birth, which was not "convenient to his nobility."

¹⁷ The sources of Boccaccio are discussed by M. Landau, *Die Quellen des Dekameron*, Stuttgart, 1884, and A. C. Lee, *The Decameron: its Sources and Analogues*, London, 1909. Neither book is satisfactory. Landau's analyses of tales are so brief as often to be misleading, and the relationships of such tales to each other and to the main story are often too superficially disposed of. It is impossible to give such complicated questions brief treatment with satisfactory results. Lee's book, which is heavily indebted to Landau, suffers in a similar way. Both are useful for bibliographical refer-

According to Gaston Paris, the source of the story is to be found in the Orient. The following tale, which I summarize, is therefore of special interest.

A clever woman was married to a husband who said to her one day, "I cannot stay at home any more, for I must go on a year's journey to carry on my business." And he added, laughing, "When I return I expect to find you have built me a grand well; and also, as you are such a clever wife, to see a little son!" The wife got the money by a series of ruses, and had the well dug. She then travelled a long distance in man's attire, until she found her husband. Then she disguised herself again as a cowherd's daughter. The husband was attracted by her beauty, but did not recognize her, and proposed marriage. So they were married. At the end of three months he said that he must return. She asked him to give her his old cap and his picture. She then went back to her home, where a son was born to her. On the husband's arrival, he was not pleased to see the baby, but she showed him the cap and the picture, and told him the whole story, pointing out the new well also. So all ended happily.¹⁸

Gaston Paris did not think that an Oriental parallel to the *All's Well* theme had been found, and he did not consider Landau's Indian analogs significant. "Les contes indiens qu'en rapproche M. Landau (*Die Quellen des Decamerone*, 2e. éd. p. 146 ss) ont une ressemblance plus ou moins éloignée, mais ne présentent pas le trait essentiel du conte, l'ordre, en apparence inéxecutable, donné par le mari à la femme, et exécuté par elle."¹⁹—But this *is* in the tale just given, though Landau's analysis does not show it. Perhaps Paris had not seen the full text of the tale, and was depending upon Landau's rather misleading outline. He thought the following Turkish story of special importance.

ences, and may be used to supplement the material here quoted. Landau has a particular fondness for tracing the origins of the *novelle* to India, sometimes on the basis of slight resemblances.

¹⁸ Maive Stokes, *Indian Fairy Tales*, London, 1880. "The Clever Wife," Tale XXVIII, p. 216.

¹⁹ *Romania*, XVI, 98., note. Some discussion of Eastern parallels—not particularly satisfactory—will be found in *The Remarks of M. Karl Simrock on the Plots of Shakespeare's Plays*, with Notes and Additions by J. O. Halliwell, London, (The Shakespeare Society), 1850, pp. 95 ff.

A certain prince had a Vizier, who was the father of a twelve-year old daughter. Hearing the maiden's cleverness praised, the prince called the Vizier to him, and propounded a riddle, which the Vizier was to answer within three days, or lose his head. After three days had passed, and the Vizier could find no answer, his daughter gave him the solution. When the prince was told, he asked who had given the Vizier the answer. At first the Vizier asserted that he himself had guessed the riddle; then he admitted that his daughter had aided him. The prince answered, "If that is the case, the maiden will do for my wife." The girl demanded that before they were married, the prince should bring her a white elephant, and a man without sorrow. The elephant was procured, but the prince, after searching vainly for three years for a man without sorrow, returned home. He then married the Vizier's daughter, but did not live with her. Instead, he went off hunting, announcing that he should be gone nine years. Upon leaving he gave his wife an empty chest, the mouth of which was sealed with his seal, commanding her to fill it with gold and silver without opening it, and a mare who must give birth to a foal like his black horse. He also told his wife that she must bear a child, instruct him well, and send the child to him, mounted upon the horse.

After he had been gone three days, the wife attired herself like a king's son, dressed up four hundred maidens like men, and rode out after her husband. She pitched her tent near the place where he was staying, thus attracting his attention. Hospitalities were exchanged, the prince not recognizing his wife in disguise. They played checkers in the prince's tent. The pretended youth proposed that they should play for a stake. So each wagered his horse, saddle, trappings, and seal. The wife won, and retiring to her tent with the seal, she brought the horse and mare together. Opening the chest, she filled it with gold and silver, and sealed it with her husband's seal. She then sent horse, trappings and seal back to the prince. The next evening, the wife proposed that they play for a girl. She purposely lost, and told the prince that she would send him a beautiful female slave. Retiring to her tent, she then assumed that disguise, and came back to her husband. He was inflamed with love for the supposed slave, and lay that night with her. They drank spirits (Branntwein), and the slave gave the prince a box on the ear. Angry and drunken, he chased the slave away from his tent. The wife then collected her retinue, and returned home.

After nine months, nine days and nine hours, she bore a son, whom she had well instructed as he grew older. The mare also bore a foal. At the end of the nine years, the prince returned. His son was placed on the steed, and sent to meet his father. The prince was told that the boy was the son of the Vizier's daughter. At first he was angry, thinking that the child was not his own. Then the wife showed him the chest, told him that the steed on which the boy was riding was the issue of the mare and his own horse, and related the whole story.

"Then the prince was exceedingly joyful over what the maiden had done; because she was exceedingly clever and well-instructed, he exalted her above all his other wives. After he had lived with her a long time, he finally died."²⁰

The motivation of the husband's desertion varies. The Indian tale, "The Clever Wife," just cited from the collection by Stokes, is unusual in that the husband lays his commands upon his wife as a jest. In the Turkish story there seems to be no reason for the husband's departure for a nine-year stay, immediately after the marriage, but I am inclined to think that a fuller form of the tale would reveal it as pique for the tasks laid upon him by his wife,²¹—the procuring of a white elephant and a man who had known no sorrow. Oral circulation frequently obscures the motivation of popular stories. The introductory episode of the Turkish tale, in which the girl wins a husband by her cleverness, should be especially noted.

A pretty example of the theme comes from a collection of Norwegian ballads.²²

King Kristian goes off to war, and lays three tasks upon his wife. She must build a throne shining like the morning sun, construct a magnificent hall, and have a child by him. She gets advice from an old man. After the accomplishment of the first two tasks, she follows her husband to Scotland in disguise, and is gotten with child by him. The king gives her a ring with his name on it, which serves as a proof of the paternity of the child when he returns home.

The strange compilation known as the *Mágussaga* or the *Bragða-Mágus saga* well illustrates the introduction of the episode into a longer narrative. The material in the saga was in large part carried to Iceland by men who had listened to

²⁰ W. Radloff, *Proben der Volksliteratur der nördlichen türkischen Stämme*, Vol. VI, Dialect der Tarantschi. St. Petersburg, 1886. "Die Kluge Wesirs-Tochter," pp. 191-198.

²¹ Cf. the *Mágussaga*, below. Anger at the division of the cock, which is imposed upon Hlothver by his bride Ermenga, leads to his setting her the tasks which form the main theme of the episode.

²² M. B. Landstad, *Norske Folkeviser*, Christiania, 1853. "Kong Kristian og hans dronning," No. LXXIII, pp. 585 ff.

the tales of French minstrels, and after being further altered by oral transmission, was worked up into written form. In its present shape it cannot be earlier than the middle of the thirteenth century. The portion which is of interest for us may be briefly summarized.

Hlothver is king of Saxland. One day he asks his counsellor Sigurd whether there is a king equal to him on earth. Sigurd tells him that as long as he lacks a wife and children his power is not complete, and draws his attention to Ermenga, daughter of Hugon of Miklagarth. The marriage is arranged, and Hlothver goes to get his bride. Ermenga paints her face white with chalk-water, and brings Hlothver a roasted cock, asking him to divide it between her and her father and two brothers. Hlothver is annoyed, but divides the cock. He returns to his own land, but remembers the insult. A Danish army is besieging Trevis. Hlothver, on going to war, sets his wife, in revenge for the insult of the division of the cock, three tasks, to be accomplished within three years: she must build a hall, as splendid as that of her father; she must get a stallion, sword and hawk, as costly as those owned by Hlothver; she must show him a son of whom he is father and she the mother. She builds the hall. She then gives Sigurd the regency of Saxland, goes to Miklagarth, and brings back sixty warriors to Trevis, which is held by the Danes. She calls herself Jarl Iring of Alimannia, and enters the army of the Danish king. Her brother Hrolf, who is with Hlothver, tells him he has seen a fair maiden looking out of a window of the city. Ermenga, as the maiden, tells Hlothver that she is captive of Jarl Iring and that she is a princess of Frigia, and beseeches him to free her. The king sends for Iring, who consents to give up the captive for the king's stallion, sword and hawk. She then puts on women's clothes, and is conducted by Hrolf to the king, who keeps her three nights. She gets possession of the king's ring. With the help of Hrolf she returns to Saxland, where a son is born to her. The king returns also in due time, and finds that the tasks have been performed.

The anger of Hlothver at the division of the cock—a widespread folk-theme—is not a plausible reason for the imposition of the tasks. The whole saga, indeed, quite lacks the artistry which transforms varied materials into a unified whole, and is therefore not significant in a study of motivation in medieval story-telling.²³

²³ Cf. Paul's *Grundriss*, Strassburg, 1901-1909, II, 874. Especially useful is H. Suchier, "Die Quellen der Mágussaga," *Germania*, XX (1875), 273-291. For references to the division of the cock, see J. Bolte and G. Polívka, *Anmerkungen zu den Kinder-und Hausmärchen der Brüder Grimm*, Leipzig, 1915, II, 360. I have depended for the above summary on Suchier's fuller analysis, pp. 275 ff.

Far finer in every way is the charming prose romance *Le Livre du Très Chevalereux Comte d'Artois et de sa Femme*.²⁴ This graceful story, which reflects the full tide of chivalry, deserves especial attention. The hero and heroine are historical, but their adventures are fictitious. Philip I of Burgundy, born in 1323, the son of Eudes IV and Jeanne de France, Countess of Artois, married in 1338 the Countess Jeanne of Boulogne, who bore him an heir in 1342. Philip died in 1346. The title "Comte d'Artois" was never properly his; it would have passed to him on the death of his mother, who survived him. The romance appears to have been written in the later fifteenth century for Rodulf, marquis of Axberg, count of Neuchâtel, a friend of the Duke of Burgundy. Devices in the ornamentation make it probable that one manuscript was prepared for the wedding of Rodulf's son with Marie of Savoy in 1476. Rodulf himself died in 1487. The important point is that the romance affords a faithful picture of chivalric conventions of the later fifteenth century, and that its purpose is in effect a glorification and exaltation of an earlier Duke of Burgundy and his wife. The theme of *All's Well* is much expanded by descriptions of the "grans vaillances" of the noble count, after leaving his wife. These, with the introductory matter preceding the marriage, form considerably more than half of the whole work. The development of the main theme is thus greatly retarded.

²⁴ The edition by J. Barrois, Paris, 1837, is a joy to read, with its clear type approximating in form to the fifteenth-century letters, and its reproductions of the excellent drawings in the MS,—excellent despite obvious faults of perspective and proportion. A good idea of the distribution of the material may be gained from the summaries of the contents of each section of the romance. As to the character of the material, the editor remarks, "L'ouvrage qui nous occupe ne sauroit donc être considéré comme historique qu'en ce sens qu'il retrace les aventures d'un personnage réel, dont la plupart des actions ont été imaginées d'après ce qui se passoit sous les yeux de l'auteur, et narrées de manière à impressionner l'esprit de ses contemporains." (p. xxii) For biographical details, see the *Introduction*, pp. ix, xvii.

The Count of Artois was united in marriage to the daughter of the Count of Boulogne, with great pomp and rejoicing. Two or three years were happily spent by the couple in their city of Arras, but no child was born to them. This put the Count into a deep melancholy. One day, as he was leaning at a window thinking of this matter, the Countess approached, and asked the reason of his dejection. He replied, "realizing her devotion and good-will towards him," that he had formed a firm resolution. "This is, that I shall leave this country, and not return to be with you, until three impossible things are accomplished: first, that you be with child by me, and that I know it not; second, that I give you my steed that I love so much, and that I know it not; third and last, that I give you my diamond also, and that I know it not." Shortly thereafter the Count rode away, leaving his wife behind so sorely afflicted that it was long believed that life had left her body. The adventures of the Count are then related at length. After the first despair of her grief was over, the Countess cast about for means to accomplish the tasks laid upon her. Clad in man's attire, she set out to find her husband, attended by a faithful vassal named Olivier. Feigning that she was going on a pilgrimage, she followed her husband to Valladolid, where she recognized his lodgings by the arms outside the door. Taking the name of Philipot, she entered his service as page. Sleeping in his chamber, as was the custom, she overhears her husband sighing for the love of the daughter of the king of Castille. She reveals the Count's love to the duenna of the princess, and also tells the duenna her whole story. They arrange that the Count shall be told that the princess grants him her love, but that in reality the Countess shall be substituted in her place in bed. This is done; the trick is repeated secretly many times, and the Countess is got with child. In her disguise as page, she receives from her husband the diamond, as a reward for her services in the love-affair, and the horse as well, to heal the malady from which the page appears to suffer. The Countess then makes her way back to Arras, where she calls an assembly of the nobles and clergy, and tells them of her accomplishment of the tasks laid upon her by her husband. The Count is sent for by an embassy headed by the Bishop of Arras, who tells him of the fulfilment of the tasks. The Count is deeply impressed by the devotion of his wife, and returns to Arras, where a child is born to them. "There they lived in happy tranquillity for the rest of their lives."

The motivation of the story is not faultless. "The Countess of Artois is abandoned by her husband, who imposes the well-known conditions because, after three years of married life, she has given him no child. It is, therefore, absurd for her to run all the dangers to which she exposes herself, in order to pass one night with her husband, with so proble-

matical a chance of success."²⁵ This blemish is very effectually concealed by the charm with which the whole is narrated, however.

It is time to consider the bearing of these stories upon the interpretation of *All's Well that Ends Well*.

In the first place, they exalt the cleverness and devotion of the woman; the wits of the wife are more than a match for those of the husband, and her purpose is a happy reunion with him. There are analogous tales, of a similar significance, of a wife lying incognito with her husband without the imposition of tasks. A pretty Spanish poem²⁶ treats "del engaño que usó la reina doña Maria de Aragon, para qué el rey don Pedro su marido durmiese con ella." The husband is pleased,²⁷ and summons witnesses. The queen has a child in due course of time. An Egyptian folk-tale tells of the marriage of a girl of the Clever Wench type with a prince. After they are married he refuses to live with her. She disguises herself three times and has three children by him. When he learned the truth he "was very happy and recognized the superiority of his wife . . . and they lived in happiness and prosperity all their lives"²⁸ In many other analogs an unmarried woman must perform difficult tasks before a man will marry her. The tale of Diarmaid and Graidhne will serve as an illustration; I quote Professor Child's summary.

The Graidhne whom we have seen winning Fionn for husband by guessing his riddles . . . afterwards became enamored of Diarmaid, Fionn's nephew, in consequence of her accidentally seeing a beauty spot on Diarmaid's forehead. This had the power of infecting with love any woman whose eye

²⁵ Gaston Paris, *loc. cit.* It should be observed, however, that the intimacy of the Count and Countess extends over a considerable time in the romance, not a single night. Cf. Barrois, p. 171.

²⁶ F. J. Wolf, *Über eine Sammlung spanischer Romanzen in fliegenden Blättern auf der Universitäts-Bibliothek zu Prag*, Wien, 1850, p. 42.

²⁷ El rey quedó del engaño con muy grande admiracion; pero como era discreto por ello no se enojó.

²⁸ Antin-Pacha: *Contes populaires de la Vallée du Nil*, Paris, 1895, "La Fille du Menuisier," tale XX, p. 239.

should light upon it: wherefore Diarmaid used to wear his cap well down. Graidhne tried to make Diarmaid run away with her. But he said, "I will not go with thee. I will not take thee in softness, and I will not take thee in hardness; I will not take thee without, and I will not take thee within; I will not take thee on horseback, and I will not take thee on foot." Then he went and built himself a house where he thought he should be out of her way. But Graidhne found him out. She took up a position between the two sides of the door, on a buck goat, and called to him to go with her. For, said she, "I am not without, I am not within; I am not on foot, and I am not on a horse; and thou must go with me." After this Diarmaid had no choice.²⁹

Very numerous are the tales in which the Clever Wench gives more than one proof of her wit; first, before marriage, and then after her union to the desirable husband, generally of high station, whom her adroitness has won for her.³⁰ Among these tales is, of course, the *novella* of Boccaccio which serves as a basis for Shakspeare's play. The immediate source of the *novella* remains to be discovered.

In the second place, the husband, in the tales of married heroines with which we are chiefly concerned, accepts the situation as an evidence of his wife's courage and love. Nowhere is there a suggestion that he regards himself as having been despicably tricked. Many of the tales emphasize his pleasure at the outcome. And his rejoicing has a good foundation, for all these couples seem, in the good old way, "to live happily ever after." The merits of the wife bring their reward. In the *Romance of the Count of Artois*, the duenna, whom the count interviews before returning home, in order to learn from her the whole truth, puts the matter plainly. "Par foy, sire, fait-elle, le celer ne vous vault riens; si vous jure en ma conscience qu'à la plus léale et meilleure dame de quoy l'en puist tenir parole estez-vous mariés; et bien

²⁹ *Engl. and Scot. Popular Ballads*, I, 8. The whole of this introduction to the ballad of the Elfin Knight may be read with profit.

³⁰ Cf. Bolte and Volfvka's analysis of Grimm's tale "Die kluge Bauern-tochter," *loc. cit.*, II, 349 ff., which tells of the girl's cleverness both before and after marrying the king. A very large number of variants are registered. The whole discussion of this story by Bolte and Volfvka serves to show how complicated a study of the sources of Boccaccio's *novella* might be made, and how impossible any such exhaustive study would be here.

l'a monsté quant pour vostre amour a enduré telle peine qui ne puet à dame estre pareille, durant sa queste ennuyeuse, laquelle jà n'eust achevée ne fust sa science et bonne conduite; si me fist son fait si grant pitié avoir au cuer, qu'à luy aidier ay mis l'onneur de ma dame et mon bien en adventure, dont il n'est en riens mesvenu, pour quoy je loue Dieu et la benoite vierge Marie sa précieuse mère, à qui je prie qu'ilz veullent changier vostre vouloir en telle manière que ce soit à la joye de ma dame la contesse d'Artois, qui si léalment vous ayme que bien vous en doit souvenir à toutes heures."³¹

In the sources of *All's Well*, then, we recognize a Virtue-Story, exalting the devotion of a woman to the man who so far forgets his duty as to treat her cruelly. Analogs of other kinds will occur to the reader immediately; the adventures of Griselda or Fair Annie, in which a husband comes to realize the fidelity of his wife after she has been subjected to the most trying of proofs, the ballad of *Child Waters*, in which the heroine, though pregnant, is forced to follow her lover's horse on foot before the man relents, the *Nut-Brown Maid*, which exhibits various tests of the woman's fidelity, ending with the moral,

Here may ye see that wimen be
In love, meke, kinde, and stable.

All this directly contradicts the argument that the actions of Helena in regaining her husband would not have seemed deserving of admiration. There is in Shakspeare's play, to be sure, no formal recognition of Helena's devotion and cleverness. The reason for this is clear; it has been crowded out in order to sustain the dramatic suspense by making things seem to go against the heroine up to the last moment. Of all this there is no suggestion in Boccaccio's tale. Bertram is betrothed to Lafeu's daughter, and gives a ring as a token. The King recognizes it as having belonged to Helena. Bertram denies this, saying it was thrown him from a window in Florence. He is led away, and a letter from

³¹ Barrois, pp. 188 f.

Diana is read, stating that Bertram promised to marry her. Bertram is brought back, and the Widow and Diana both pray that the King will have the marriage performed. With insulting words, Bertram denies any obligation to Diana. She then shows the ring, which Bertram admits was his, and offers to return it, if he will give her her own. She says it is like the ring upon the finger of the King, and that she gave it to Bertram in bed. Bertram confesses the ring was hers, and Parolles says that Bertram promised to marry Diana. The King asks Diana where she got the ring; she answers in riddles, and at last sends for Helena, who produces the ring.

This complicated series of mistakes is far more dramatic as material for a fifth act than the pretty scene in the French romance in which husband and wife are united, or the elaborate banquet-setting in Boccaccio's tale. After these mistakes are all resolved, the final reconciliation of Bertram and Helena is curiously brief and bald, even more so than in *Cymbeline*, when Posthumus and Imogen are at last united. Other reasons for this brevity of treatment in *All's Well* will appear presently. Here the point to observe is that for dramatic reasons the Virtue Story quality, so evident in the analogues, is somewhat disguised in Shakspeare's dénouement.

We are now in a position to refute the assertion that Helena is guilty of indelicate persistence in pursuing the man who has rebuffed her. Just such persistence, such single-eyed devotion to a good object, irrespective of all other considerations, was regarded as meritorious. It is one of the most striking features of the Virtue Stories. As Hales says of the tale of Griselda, "the story does not contemplate the virtue it celebrates in reference to other virtues. It does not concern itself with these; in its devotion to its one object, it may even outrage some of them."³² I have already pointed out the importance of a proper understanding of this matter, in a discussion of the wager-plot in *Cymbeline*.³³

³² *Percy Folio Manuscript*, ed. Hales and Furnivall, III, 422.

³³ *P. M. L. A.*, XXXV, 407.

That a virtue might be carried too far, or that it might transgress the most elementary demands of common-sense and decency in making for its goal, seems to have been little regarded in medieval story. Fantastic exaggerations were common, and due allowance must be made for these exaggerations when we find them woven into the fabric of Shakspeare's plays.

Equally untenable, in the light of early analogs, is the idea that the bed-trick is immodest, unworthy of a refined woman. There is never the least intimation in these analogs that the heroine, in thus proving her devotion, is doing an immodest thing. The answer would have been: she is lying with her husband, as any chaste wife has a right to do. The objection that delicacy would prevent her from doing so under false pretences would have been met by an Elizabethan, partly by the obvious point that she has to do so in order to fulfil her husband's conditions, and partly by the conviction, which we have just noted, that virtue should stick at nothing in pursuing its course. Would the elegant chronicler of the adventures of the Count of Artois, writing in the late fifteenth century, in order to compliment the houses of Burgundy and Artois, have attributed this ruse to the elegant and virtuous Countess if it had seemed indelicate? Would Shakspeare, in *Measure for Measure*, have made the ensky'd and sainted Isabella, the gentle forsaken Mariana, and the benevolent Duke use a similar stratagem if it had been felt repugnant to modesty?

What, now, as to the psychological adequacy of the ending of the play? Shall we conclude that "the triumph of Helena's love will be merely external," that a union so brought about will never be happy?

To argue thus is to miss the whole point of the Faithful Wife theme, whether in medieval and Renaissance analogs, or in Shakspeare. ‡ No matter how harsh the treatment of the woman by the man, no matter how unsuited they may seem to each other, it is a convention of the Virtue-Story that they "live happily ever after."

Ful many a yeer in heigh prosperitee
Liven these two in concord and in reste,

says Chaucer, after the trials of Griselda are over. After their reunion, the Count of Artois and his wife "vesquirent en bonne tranquillité le résidu du temps qu'ils avoient à vivre." So Beltramo lived with Giletta, "come sua sposa e moglie onorando, l'amò e sommamente ebbe cara." In the cold light of reason, these endings may not seem destined to bring happiness. So one may argue that Cophetua and the Beggar Maid would have had little in common; she might have longed to exchange palace etiquet for the delightful freedom of begging on the street. Would the Prince have really been happy with Cinderella, obviously of a very different social station, just because she happened to have a small foot? The answer is, of course he would; the cold light of reason is no guide in stories. The fulfilment of the task is not a logical settlement of the dislike or indifference of the man for the woman, but it has perfect validity in a tale. Bertram, in setting the tasks for Helena, was really only stating in picturesque fashion that he would never live with her. "When thou canst get the ring upon my finger, which never shall come off, and show me a child begotten of thy body that I am father to, then call me husband, but in such a 'then' I write a 'never.'" Dorigen in the *Franklin's Tale* sets an impossible condition, as she thinks, in order to get rid of an importunate wooer, like the ladies in the analogous tales in the *Filocolo* and the *Decameron*. But when the seemingly impossible is accomplished, the promise has to be kept. In the tales which we have just been examining, the accomplishment of the tasks, like the fitting of the slipper on Cinderella's foot, seems miraculously to melt away all reluctance on the part of the promiser. The inconsequence of fairy tales in this regard has been delightfully satirized by Barrie, in *A Kiss for Cinderella*. The Prince is very bored with the whole business, and as Cinderella advances for the trial he says, "Oh, bother!"

(These words are the last spoken by him in his present state. When we see him again, which is the moment afterwards, he is translated. He looks the same, but so does a clock into which new works have been put. The change is effected quite simply by Cinderella delicately raising her skirt and showing him her foot. As the exquisite nature of the sight thus vouchsafed him penetrates his being, a tremor passes through his frame; his vices take flight from him and the virtues enter. It is a heady awakening, and he falls at her feet.)

"His vices take flight from him and the virtues enter." Could anything more perfectly describe what happens to Bertram at the end of the play than this? Or what happens to the men whom Julia, Hero, Mariana, Celia, Imogen, and other pure and beautiful heroines marry? "We are astonished," says Creizenach, "how easily in these closing scenes the wrong-doers are pardoned, even when through their criminal devices they have conjured up the greatest dangers. . . . Furthermore, it often happens that in the closing scenes attempts at poisoning and the like are no longer reprehended. The most unbelievable forgiveness in this regard is that of the innocent and suffering women, who in many such pieces are forsaken by their husbands for a mistress, or even pursued with attempt to kill. *Conclusions about the moral convictions and feelings of the dramatists cannot be drawn from these scenes:*³⁴ they are obviously a part of the style of the romantic and unrealistic drama, as in comedy, where all ends with general happiness; we shall also notice examples of such ready forgiveness in Spanish comedies."³⁵ The reason why occurrences of this sort in drama were confined to no one region is that the conventions of storytelling which produced them were the common traditions of the various countries of Western Europe.

I imagine that some readers of the preceding pages have questioned whether the general critical method here pursued is sound, whether the conventions of the Middle Ages may properly be applied to literature of the age of Elizabeth.

³⁴ Italics mine.

³⁵ Creizenach, *Geschichte des neueren Dramas*, Halle, 1909, IV, 306 ff. I am indebted for this reference to Schücking.

I would urge that in very large measure those conventions do hold, and that they may be properly applied in criticism. Indeed, I believe that they illuminate much which is otherwise difficult of explanation. The false connotations of the word "medieval" are still very potent, however. Many people still balk at the idea that anything medieval can really be significant for such a glorious "modern" as Shakspeare. The real modernity of the Middle Ages is only just coming to be fully understood. "The more we know of the conditions of those times," says Dr. Foakes-Jackson, "the plainer does it become that our problems are often the same under different names, and that even modern views, which pass for being advanced, have their counterpart in those days."³⁶ Certainly this must be even truer of the Elizabethan era, which was so much closer to the Middle Ages than we are. I will quote from a private letter from one of the most distinguished of English Shakspeare critics, in connection with medieval elements in Shakspeare. "It is only the best scholars (and some simple human beings quite unscholarly) who do not fall into the trap presented by the words 'Middle Ages' and 'Medieval.' The Middle Ages were inhabited, not by a strange people across a dark frontier, but by ourselves. The frontier was built (and the name invented) by the arrogance of the newly intoxicated Renaissance. There are differences, of course, but chiefly in the means and methods of civilization, and especially in the literary art. They accepted a story, and told it, as a story, without critical preoccupations."

I have already urged the importance of a study of the survival of medieval chivalric ideas, in criticising *Cymbeline* and *Troilus and Cressida*.³⁷ Posthumus Leonatus has been blamed by generations of critics for the wager which he makes on his wife's honor, yet when the story is carefully

³⁶ *An Introduction to the History of Christianity*, New York, 1921, p. vii.

³⁷ For the paper on *Cymbeline*, see above, note 33; for that on *Troilus and Cressida*, *Shakesperian Studies*, New York, Columbia Univ. Press, 1916, pp. 187 ff.

examined, it becomes clear that according to the social convictions of Shakspeare's day, Posthumus could have acted in no other fashion. Boas has well emphasized the medieval conception of "service" in *All's Well*. "[Helena] feels throughout that as a dependent of the great house she stands in a feudal relation to Bertram, and that in return for the protection extended to her, she owes him, in the technical sense, 'service.'"³⁸ The reader may follow the development of this argument at his leisure; he will note how completely it disposes of the conclusions of Gervinus. Due allowance has to be made for changes in the Elizabethan attitude towards chivalry; *Troilus and Cressida* marks a distinct shift in the point of view. But this does not mean that Shakspeare had reached anything like our modern convictions about social ethics. He was on the whole far nearer to the days of Chaucer than to those of Tennyson.

The traditions of the Middle Ages were just as strong in Shakspeare's day in popular as in chivalric tradition,—in tales transmitted orally in ballad form and in prose narrative among the unlettered, in narratives in the spirit of the *fabliaux*, in folk-lore, and in cheap printed texts preserving the favorite stories of earlier times. It is a commonplace that Shakspeare utilized much of this material. But he took over not merely "the story"; he was influenced very deeply by current traditions as to what the story meant, and how it was to be interpreted. The spirit as well as the substance of medieval narrative entered vitally into his plays. He was a man peculiarly close to the people, in birth, education, and the conditions of his craft as actor and author. He knew perfectly well what tales his audiences were familiar with, and when he put one of these, or an analogous story, upon the stage, he had to make his work conform in large measure to the way in which the spectators would naturally understand it. His part was not to alter radically events or motivation, but to make the personages in the

³⁸ *Shakespeare and His Predecessors*, p. 350.

story seem so real, by his marvellous power of characterization, and to set them in such effective dramatic action, that the whole gained new life, new vividness, new interest.

This goes far to explain the sharp contrast which the modern reader feels between the improbability of many of Shakspeare's plots, and his extraordinary knowledge of human nature. Are we to suppose that he did not perceive such incongruities? Not at all; he must have known that a girl like Portia would hardly have staked her life's happiness upon a silly business like the choice of the caskets, nor Viola, shipwrecked upon a foreign coast, have decided to serve the reigning duke in the guise of a eunuch. But the conventions of story were so strong with him and with his audience that these incongruities troubled him and them far less than they do us. They really disturb modern audiences but little, for we still have similar conventions in story and drama today. The poor girl who marries the rich youth who has tried to seduce her, and finally reformed, is a familiar type in cheap fiction and in melodrama, and the general conclusion is that she is extremely lucky to marry a man of better social station and abundant funds, no matter what his actions have been. The moral eighteenth century wept copiously over Pamela's trials, but envied her final good fortune. The "happy land, where things come right" on the stage and in romance³⁹ will probably be with us for a long time yet, and the critic, with all his devotion to logic and reason, must make his judgments conform in large measure to its accepted improbabilities.

The real objection of many critics to the conduct of Helena lies, I think, in having a heroine mixed up in what is to modern ideas an unsavory sexual intrigue. They are disturbed at Helena's badinage with Parolles about virginity, and even see in it a deliberate coarsening of her character. It seems rather trite to remark that the Elizabethan attitude towards such matters was quite different from our own.

³⁹ See the charming essay by Brander Matthews, "The Pleasant Land of Scribia," in *The Principles of Playmaking*. New York, 1919, pp. 133 ff.

A little reading of the contemporary drama of Webster, Middleton, Beaumont and Fletcher, and the rest is one of the best correctives to setting too high a standard of delicacy in this period. Even in Shakspeare, who is far more decent than any of them, one is often surprised at the tone of conversation and jesting in mixed company as to marital relations, the getting of children, cuckoldry, indecencies of dress, and the like. There really seems to be no need to collect a floralegium of unfragrant passages to prove the point. Perhaps the Elizabethans were no worse than ourselves, but their social conventions and taboos were quite different. We do not think a plot that turns upon the substitution of a woman in bed is very suitable matter for the stage today, nor that it is very pleasant to have the girl who engages all our sympathy made the center of it, but the frequency with which the theme was used in early times in narrative and in Elizabethan days upon the stage shows how very differently people then felt.

Many good critics have been led astray by forgetfulness of these considerations and of the social arrangements of the Elizabethan age. For example, Schücking, in the excellent book to which reference has already been made, is very severe with Mariana for accepting the proposal made to her by Isabella, at the suggestion of the Duke of Vienna.

Unheard-of, unspeakable demand upon the honor of a betrothed and forsaken girl! Does she not hesitate? Are not the others obliged to have recourse to conjurations and tears, to fall upon their knees and implore her? Not at all; she is immediately willing to catch the faithless Angelo in the bed of love at night as in a trap. One sees with astonishment how lightly the self-respect of a woman is here estimated. This solution corresponds to the convictions of the fourteenth century, when Boccaccio was alive. It arises, as far as its moral elevation is concerned, from the middle and lower social orders of the Middle Ages, but certainly not from the convictions of the seventeenth century, which was just then beginning, the ideas of which about woman, as they appear to us in Overbury, Hall, and others, reveal in comparison a noticeable elevation. Is one to suppose that Shakspeare, who shows in other places such immeasurably fine feeling for human dignity, had no sense of the riskiness (*Bedenklichkeit*) of this solution of the play?

Schücking's answer is that Shakspeare was guilty here, and in *Much Ado*, *All's Well*, and the *Winter's Tale*, of "neglect of his highest powers" and of seeking "the easiest solution."⁴⁰

It is to be remembered that Mariana, though not married to Angelo, was betrothed to him, and that this betrothal was then held to have much the binding force of a full marriage ceremony, and to confer certain of its rights.⁴¹ Again, a little

⁴⁰ See above, note 12, and cf. pp. 196, 199, 201, of Schücking's book.

⁴¹ Note what is said in the play: "She should this Angelo have married; was affianced to him by oath, and the nuptial appointed." But she lost her dowry, so Angelo "left her in her tears," pretending to find dishonor in her. Nevertheless, she still loved him. The Duke reassures Mariana,

Nor, gentle daughter, fear you not at all.
He is your husband on a pre-contract:
To bring you thus together, 'tis no sin,
Sith that the justice of your title to him
Doth flourish the deceit (Act IV, Sc. I).

and he tells Isabella that she may "most uprighteously do a poor wronged lady a merited benefit."

The importance of the betrothal in Shakspeare's plays has not been sufficiently recognized. I have already discussed it in connection with *Cymbeline* (*Publications*, loc. cit., p. 412, note). Furness conjectures that the union of Imogen with Posthumus was merely a betrothal or "handfasting," though it was to Imogen as holy as marriage, and it had clearly brought with it full marital rights, cf. Act II, Sc. V, I. 9. Furness's view is that if the couple had been united by the full marriage ceremony, the wooing of Cloten and the urging of his suit by the queen would have been impossible. In this connection the definition of "handfasting" cited by the *New English Dictionary* from Jamieson, 1808-1825, may be repeated. "*To handfast*, to betrothe by joining hands, in order to cohabitation [sic] before the celebration of marriage." Consider also Claudio's union with Juliet in *Measure for Measure*, which was to be regarded as legal according to the current practice.

upon a true contract
I got possession of Julietta's bed.
You know the lady, she is fast my wife,
Save that we do the denunciation lack
Of outward order.

They had waited on account of the dowry. Meanwhile the sudden revival of an ancient and neglected law resulted in Claudio's arrest. We do not need to take this statute too seriously; law in Shakspeare's romances is often queer

reflection on the themes of aristocratic literature in the Middle Ages will convince anyone that this ruse, to which Schücking objects, is not specially characteristic of the middle or lower social orders. We have just seen it attributed, in a medieval romance of the most courtly type, to a lady whom the writer particularly desired to compliment. Everyone knows that chivalric love sanctioned and even exalted much which would seem degrading to a woman today, and that many episodes in the most aristocratic of romances do not square with modern ideas of feminine purity. But

stuff. One thinks of Shakspeare's own union with Anne Hathaway, which may have been of the sort here discussed.

The comments of Dr. W. J. Rolfe (article *Shakespeare* in the *Encyclopedia Americana*, ed. of 1904) are worth quoting. "The marriage [of Shakspeare] had evidently been a hurried one, urged on by the relatives of the bride, but apparently not favored by those of the bridegroom, who could not honorably avoid it, and seems not to have been inclined to do so. Some biographers believe that the couple had been formally betrothed some months before the marriage, according to the custom of the time; and this is by no means improbable. The betrothal was then a legal ceremony, consisting in the interchange of rings, kissing, and joining hands, in the presence of witnesses, and often before a priest. Violation of the contract was punished by the ecclesiastical law with excommunication; and the betrothal was a legal bar to marriage with another person, except by the joint consent of the parties. In Shakespeare's time, at least among the common people, it was often regarded as conferring the rights and privileges of the more formal union that was to follow; but later in the century the Church authorities condemned this license. There may have been such a pre-contract, or betrothal, in the case of William and Ann. In the absence of any positive testimony to the contrary, it is no more than fair to allow them the benefit of the doubt.

It is an interesting fact that this ancient betrothal is introduced by Shakespeare in at least seven of his plays,—'The Two Gentlemen of Verona,' 'The Taming of the Shrew,' 'Twelfth Night,' 'The Winter's Tale' (twice), 'Much Ado,' 'Measure for Measure,' and 'King John.' In 'Twelfth Night,' Olivia, who has been betrothed to Sebastian, supposing him to be the disguised Viola, addresses the latter as 'husband,' and justifies herself by appealing to the priest before whom the ceremony had been performed, with the understanding that it was to be kept secret until the marriage should take place. Similarly, Robert Arden, the poet's maternal grandfather, in a legal document, calls his daughter Agnes the wife (*uxor*) of the man to whom she was married three months later."

this is not the main point. The important thing is that Shakspeare's plays are to be judged, not by the works of Hall or Overbury, who wrote for a small circle, and were in no wise representative of the general thought of their time, but by the literature with which the audiences of Shakspeare were familiar, literature which had proved its right to be remembered through generations of men, high and low, rich and poor. An admirable means of getting an idea of this literature is afforded by the list of books in Captain Cox's library, which may be conveniently found in Furnivall's delightful edition of *Robert Laneham's Letter*,⁴² a list which affords, as the editor puts it, "a view of the literature in which the reading members of the English middle class in Elizabeth's time were brought up." The good captain, who had "great ouersight in matters of storie," read chiefly romances and popular tales, like *Huon of Bordeaux*, *Bevis of Hampton*, *The Squire of Low Degree*, *The Tale of the Widow Edyth*, *The Nutbrown Maid*, *Sir Eglamour*, a variety of traditional ballads and popular songs, a few "auncient playz," and miscellaneous material, ranging from *The Hy Wey to the Spillhouse* to *Doctor Boord's breuiary of Health*. The plays of Shakspeare were written in large measure for the Captain Coxes of his day, and for the even less educated fellows who crowded the pit of his theater and upon whose pleasure the success of any public play largely depended. An appeal to the more cultured in the galleries and on the stage was no less possible; but such subtleties as appealed to them did not bother the vulgar, any more than they disturb people today who like *Hamlet* or *Othello* chiefly as melodrama. If the finest things in the plays of Shakspeare were not for the groundlings, the bone and sinew of them, the simple broad lines of the story, could be understood by just this class, and were meant to be. Some exception must, of course, be made in the case of plays obviously designed for court circles, but *All's Well* was not one of these. The

⁴² In *The Shakespeare Library*, New York, 1907. Cf. pp. v and xii.

piece which we are discussing did not mean one thing to Captain Cox and another to a man like the Earl of Southampton; it merely carried the more cultured man further, into a region of thought and emotion and artistic appreciation which the plainer citizen could not penetrate.

The artistic purpose of *All's Well* will be considered later more in detail. Meanwhile we may gather up the threads of the preceding argument. It is clear that, from the point of view of narrative traditions and social ethics in Shakspeare's day, the conduct of Helena in fulfilling the conditions set by Bertram for their union was admirable; that she showed cleverness, devotion and courage; that she was guilty neither of immodesty nor of unwomanly persistency; and that the "happy ending" was accepted as a convention of drama because it was also a convention of story-telling.

But what of the opening scenes? Does a similar method of investigation exonerate Helena from the charge of unworthy conduct in forcing Bertram into a marriage which he does not desire? Again, from the point of view of Shakspeare's own day, I think Helena is guiltless. The whole matter deserves separate consideration, and must be treated by itself, though fortunately it may be disposed of more rapidly than the episode which has just been analyzed.

II

HELENA AND BERTRAM: THE HEALING OF THE KING

For the sake of clearness I will call this opening episode the Healing of the King, to distinguish it from the Fulfilment of the Tasks, which has just been considered. These two themes, both of which belong to the general type known to students of popular story as "the Clever Wench," have been noted in combination, so far as my knowledge extends, only in Boccaccio and Shakspeare. Tales illustrating the cleverness of the heroine both before and after marriage are, however, very common. In a large number of these the girl wins a high-born husband by her adroitness, and then

gives other proofs of her shrewdness after her marriage. This is the case, for example, in the Turkish story of the Vizier's Clever Daughter, already cited.⁴³ The Healing of the King was obviously attached to the Fulfilment of the Tasks in a similar way, to explain how the heroine came to be married, and to illustrate her cleverness. Boccaccio probably found the two in a source not now known to us; it is possible, of course, that he made the combination himself.

Landau thinks the Healing of the King of Eastern origin. This may be true, but the best of his analogs, an Indian tale from the story-collection of Somadeva, bears, to my mind, only a slight resemblance to the incident in Boccaccio. I give a somewhat more detailed summary than he does, in order that the reader may judge for himself.⁴⁴

Kirtisenā, the wife of the rich young merchant Devasena, is ill-treated by her mother-in-law at home. Devasena goes away on a journey, after urging his mother to be kind to his wife. But the mother-in-law treats her with great cruelty, shutting her up in a dungeon, and giving her only a little rice each day. Finally Kirtisenā escapes, and putting on man's attire, joins a caravan, which is passing through the woods. She fears robbers and conceals herself in a hollow tree. The caravan is attacked by a robber band, and all are slain. Kirtisenā hears from her place of concealment in the tree a female demon (Rākshasi) telling her children about the illness of King Vasudatta. While he was asleep a centipede crawled into his ear, and multiplied in his brain. The demon goes on to narrate how the king may be healed. Kirtisenā, having listened to all this, determines to undertake the cure. Still disguised as a man, she goes to the court and announces her mission. The king promises her half of his kingdom if she succeeds. A night passes; on the next day Kirtisenā draws a hundred and fifty insects out of the king's head. She refuses half the kingdom, but accepts other rich rewards. She then hears that a caravan led by Devasena is passing through the city, and so finds her husband and tells the whole story to him and to the court. The king, deeply moved by this fidelity, gives her the honor of calling herself his sister (Dharmabhagini) and makes Devasena a citizen. In this

⁴³ See above, note 20. For analogs illustrating the union of these two themes, see Bolte and Polívka.

⁴⁴ It will be remembered that Gaston Paris found Landau's citation to prove the Indian origin of the main theme unsatisfactory, and that Landau has a tendency to insist overmuch on the importance of Eastern sources.

city husband and wife settle down to enjoy happiness for the rest of their days.⁴⁶

I do not think that it has been observed that the Healing of the King, as found in Boccaccio and Shakspeare in the *All's Well* story, is merely a variation of one of the commonest of popular themes: a man wins the hand of a king's daughter by performing a difficult task, in which failure will cost him his life. Instances of this theme need hardly be cited. Shakspeare, or more probably the unknown writer whose work he touched up, utilized it in *Pericles*: the hand of the daughter of King Antiochus is promised to the man who guesses the king's riddle, but death is his portion if he fails. Pericles guesses the riddle. The reader may follow this at his leisure through the many versions of the Apollonius of Tyre story. In the *Mabinogion*, in the tale of *Kilhwch and Olwen*, Kilhwch seeks the hand of the maiden Olwen, the daughter of Yspadadden Penkawr, a fearsome giant, who has slain many ambitious youths. Difficult tasks are set Kilhwch which he must perform before the

⁴⁶ *Berichte über die Verhandlungen der kgl. säch. Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften zu Leipzig*, Phil.-hist. Klasse. XII (1860), 125-128. Cf. Landau, *Quellen des Dekameron*, p. 148. A folk-tale recovered from the Roumanian gypsies is cited by Landau as a parallel, and summarized by him, p. 140. The reference which he gives is erroneous; after considerable searching I found the tale in another article than the one which he indicates. The correct reference is F. Miklosich, *Über die Mundarten und die Wanderungen der Zigeuner Europa's*, Part IV, *Denkschriften der Kais. Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Wien*, Phil.-hist. Klasse, Band XXIII. The tale, "The Jealous Man," is on pp. 321-324. It begins with the Cymbeline wager-theme, with recognition by a mark beneath the heroine's left breast. The husband, on discovering the supposed infidelity of his wife, sets her adrift on a boat on the Danube, and himself takes service with the Jews as a water-carrier. Upon coming to land, the wife disguises herself as a man. She tarries in a city where the Emperor is blind. It is revealed to her in a dream, as she sleeps beneath a tree, that he may be healed, and how this may be done. She performs this service, the Emperor gives her his entire kingdom, she finds her husband, and makes him emperor, while she reigns as his consort.—This little tale is instructive in showing how easily such a theme as the one under discussion may be combined with another episode, here the Cymbeline-motive.

maiden may be his, which are accomplished with the aid of Arthur and his heroes. Closer to the situation in *All's Well* is a parallel from Campbell's *Popular Tales of the West Highlands*,⁴⁶ which, in spite of its modern dress, is obviously old folk-material.

Farquhar, a drover in the Reay country, gets supernatural wisdom. The King is sick, and no doctors can heal him. Farquhar knows that the doctors are keeping a black beetle in the wound, and himself undertakes the cure, which is successful. The doctors are hanged, and Farquhar is offered lands or gold or whatever he desires as a reward. He asks for the hand of the King's daughter, and a grant of land, to which the king assents.

The variation of the theme in Boccaccio and Shakspeare consists in having it told of a woman instead of a man. The type tale would run something like this: a girl heals a sick king, her life being forfeit if she fails, and is rewarded with the hand of the king's son. Themes of this sort, which attained great popularity, could be applied either to a man or a woman. The Clever Wench tales, according to Benfey, go back to stories of a minister who assisted his sovereign in riddle-guessing. Afterwards these proofs of wisdom were attributed to a maiden helping her father, or to a wife aiding her husband. The Choosing of the Caskets theme in *The Merchant of Venice* appears in the *Gesta Romanorum* with a female Bassanio. The maiden selects the leaden casket. "And then said the emperour, O my deere daughter, because thou hast wisely chosen, therefore shalt thou marry my sonne."⁴⁷ In an interesting collection of Filipino popular tales, many of which go back to Occidental sources, there is a variant of the Clever Wench theme, in which the heroine gets the prince as a reward. "Then the king . . . said, 'Marcela, as you are so clever, witty and virtuous, I will give you my son for your husband.'"⁴⁸ In Shakspeare's play we are close to this situation. Helena

⁴⁶ No. XLVII, Paisley and London, 1890, II, 327 ff.

⁴⁷ *Variorum Shakespeare*, Philadelphia, 1888, p. 316.

⁴⁸ *Filipino Popular Tales*, collected and edited by D. S. Fansler, Lancaster, Pa., and New York, for the American Folk-Lore Society, 1921, p. 55.

is given a man as husband of whom the king says "My son's no dearer." It will be noted that she forfeits her life if she is unsuccessful in healing the king, proposing the extreme penalty herself, "With vilest torture let my life be ended." So in Boccaccio. "'Sire,' saied the maiden: 'Let me be kept in what guarde and kepyng you list: and if I doo not heale you within these eight daies, let me bee burnte.'"

In the popular tales there was, we may be sure, no reluctance to reward the girl by bestowing upon her the king's son. No one would have inquired whether he liked it, any more than whether a princess liked being married off to a prince who had done her father a favor, or performed certain difficult tasks. Common folk are always pleased, as the ballads abundantly testify, when a woman of low station marries a man of high degree. So when the king gives a nobleman to the heroine who has cured him of a grave disease, the business of that nobleman, according to the ethics of popular story, is to take her cheerfully, for better or worse.

This was in agreement with the customs of royalty, especially in the earlier and ruder period, before the doctrines of chivalric love and *fine amor* had established themselves. The *chansons de geste* afford various illustrations of the power of a king to marry a lady off at will to one of his knights. Frequently the lady was allowed to make the choice herself. This custom arose from actual conditions in the political arrangements of the times, which made it necessary for an heiress to marry, and wise for the king to act as mediator in the arrangement. The action of the king in Boccaccio and Shakspeare, then, is not to be regarded as a strange anomaly of romantic story, but the exercise of a well-recognized royal prerogative. A noble lady might demand a husband without being thought too forthputting. Gautier, who gives a most interesting discussion of this whole matter, cites the case of Helissent, daughter of Yon of Gascony. "She . . . enters into the spacious hall, inclines herself before the king, and says, without hesitation or cir-

cumlocution, 'My father has been dead two months. I want you to give me a husband.'"⁴⁹ It is easy to see how this custom would affect a popular tale, in which a girl like Giletta or Helena, not noble, but one who had performed the greatest of favors for the king, might demand a husband as a reward. In the more primitive of the romances, as in the *chansons de geste*, the lady is not ashamed to do the wooing for herself. We all remember the princess Rymenhild, who certainly displays no shyness.

'Horn,' heo sede, 'wiþute strif
þu shalt haue me to þi wif;
Horn, haue of me rewþe
and pliht me þi trewþe.'

In the highly artificial and aristocratic society portrayed in the *Decameron*, conceptions of rank and of the conduct proper for a lady had undergone a change. The ruder fashions of popular story and *chanson de geste* had been left behind. The young people who gathered amid the delights of country life to listen to one another's stories were well versed in the subtleties of courtly tradition, in a period of the sharpest class distinctions. In their eyes, a nobleman would naturally resent being expected to marry a girl beneath him in station. They would have looked for just the line of conduct which Beltramo adopted.

The Counte knewe her well, and had alreadie seen her, although she was faire, yet knowing her not to be of a stocke convenable to his nobilitie, disdainfullie said unto the King, "Will you then (sir) give me a physicion to wife? It is not the pleasure of God that ever I should in that wise bestowe myself." To whom the Kyng said: "Wilt thou then, that we should breake our faithe, which we to recover healthe have given to the damosell, who for a rewarde thereof asked thee to husband?" "Sire (quoth Beltramo) you maie take from me al that I have, and give my persone to whom you please, bicause I am your subject: but I assure you I shall never be contented with that mariage."

The repulse of the heroine is thus admirably motivated in the *Decameron*, far better than in the analogs studied in

⁴⁹ L. Gautier, *La Chevalerie*, Paris, 1884, Chapter IX. For Helissent, see p. 343.

the preceding section. Beltramo is sympathetically presented as a man unwilling to lower his social station by marriage with a physician or a physician's daughter, much as a modern aristocrat might object to an alliance with the daughter of a barber. He is rather a good fellow; there is little suggestion about him of the cruelty, deceit and viciousness of Bertram.⁵⁰ In Boccaccio's tale of the patient Griselda, the husband puts away his wife on the ground that his subjects resent his having married beneath him, and made a peasant's daughter his consort. Griselda illustrates the strength of meekness and patience; she regains her husband by lamb-like acceptance of every indignity. But this is not the virtue illustrated in the Giletta-Helena story. There the heroine is not passive; she bestirs herself very actively to gain the man she loves, by putting her life at hazard in the curing of the king. This is apparently contradictory to the conventions of courtly love so prominent in the medieval romances, and so noticeable in the *Decameron*. The earlier and ruder love-making had been displaced by the code which decreed that the man should do all the wooing, and that the lady should allow herself to be won only after suitable delay. Giletta does not proceed according to these laws. But it is to be remembered that she is not a noble lady of Beltramo's own rank, and that her courtship is not of the approved aristocratic sort. She is a poor physician's daughter, who loves a man out of her sphere with a passion which drives her to desperate means, "oltre al convenevole della tenera età." Boccaccio's formula, then, is something like this: A girl loves with consuming passion a man above her in rank, and twice overcomes his natural opposition to marrying beneath him by signal proofs of her cleverness and devotion.

⁵⁰ Except perhaps in his telling the king that he is going to return to his own country, and then riding off to Italy, and in his reply to the messengers later sent from his wife: "Alli quali esso durissimo disse: 'Di questo faccia ella il piacer suo, io per me vi tornerò allora ad esser con lei, che ella questo anello avrà in dito, et in braccio figliolo di me acquistato.' " Paynter renders "durissimo" as "chorlishlie," which gives a somewhat different meaning.

By Shakspeare's day social conventions had changed once more. The same gulf did not exist between a noble and a girl of the middle class as in the fourteenth century. Furthermore, Shakspeare emphasizes a point only implied in Boccaccio's pages: that the virtue and love of the heroine more than equalize discrepancies of rank. Bertram's "A poor physician's daughter my wife!" is countered by the king's long speech to the effect that virtue is the true nobility. How little the accident of birth should really count for Bertram is shown by the fact that the Countess favors the match. She exclaims, on hearing of Bertram's rejection of Helena,

she deserves a lord
That twenty such rude boys might tend upon,
And call her hourly mistress.

Indeed, Shakspeare goes farther than Boccaccio: he makes the rejection of Helena depend, in the last analysis, not upon discrepancies of rank, but upon Bertram's own vanity, intolerance of control, and inability to see the finer qualities of Helena. He turns Bertram, in short, into a thoroughly disagreeable, peevish, and vicious person. Bertram's feeling for his old playmate becomes downright hatred.

I'll send her to my house,
Acquaint my mother with my hate to her.

.

 War is no strife
 To the dark house and the detested wife.

Shakspere's formula is, then: a noble girl loves a self-willed fellow incapable of realizing her worth, though above her in station; she puts her life in jeopardy to win him, and he repulses her through false pride and stubbornness. With all this before them, and with the Clever Wench tradition of the popular tales in their consciousness, the audience cannot but sympathize with Helena, and the main theme of the drama, the Fulfilment of the Tasks, may proceed.

The blackening of the character of Bertram is one of the most sweeping changes made by Shakspeare in the story as a whole. As we have noted, Boccaccio's hero is not of this sort, and the medieval analogs to the Fulfilment of the Tasks story never exhibit a man so disagreeable. It is significant that in the retouching of the play, in which Shakspeare's chief interest was in the revision of character, Bertram was left with all his imperfections on his head. The Helena of the later draft is much more mature and sententious, but Bertram was not altered.⁵¹ The dramatic justification for giving Bertram so bad a character is clear, however; it makes his rejection of Helena and his incapability of understanding her finer nature more plausible, it explains his willingness to commit adultery, which the plot absolutely requires, and it creates added sympathy for the heroine, who is repulsed with singular cruelty and rudeness. In Boccaccio's day, when adultery was sanctioned, and even demanded, by the code of courtly love, no such explanation of Bertram's act would have been necessary. But the people of Shakspeare's day, as we have seen in examining *Troilus and Cressida*, thought very differently. They would not have condoned the violation of the marriage vows of a man wedded to a girl like Helena, even though he had been united to her against his will. And Shakspeare still further utilizes the baseness of Bertram for dramatic effect in Act V. The interest at the end of the play is sustained by the young Count's frantic efforts to wriggle out of the complications of the Diana intrigue by lying and slandering the girl to whom he had sworn eternal fidelity. All this could not have happened had Bertram been a sympathetic character. The difficulty for the modern dramatist would lie in making plausible the final union of such a cad and villain with the heroine. But this, as we have had occasion to remark earlier in this study, was a thing which bothered Shakspeare and his contemporaries very little indeed.

⁵¹ See above, note 14.

To the deliberate degradation of Bertram, which naturally makes the main plot far less pleasant, is due a good deal of the apparent cynicism in the treatment of Parolles, who is, after Bertram, one of the least agreeable of all the people in the play. On first thought, a sub-plot presenting so despicable a rascal as Parolles might seem to reflect bitterness on the part of the dramatist. But if the whole matter is carefully considered, I think it becomes clear that Parolles could not be represented otherwise without weakening the main plot. He is the boon companion of Bertram, as Falstaff of Prince Hal. With so genial and agreeable a misleader of youth as Falstaff, Prince Hal's wild nights in the London stews seem excusable. No one can wonder at his falling under the spell of a character who fascinates everyone about him. But there is nothing of Falstaff's personal charm or lovable quality about Parolles. He is a cad, through and through, whose associates heartily despise him. We instinctively feel that only a boy of weak character and vicious tendencies would select him as a bosom friend. Were Parolles an attractive person, we should insensibly be led to feel more tolerance for Bertram's shortcomings. But Shakspeare does not make this mistake. In order to keep the baseness of Bertram constantly before us, he makes his most intimate companion a despicable rascal.

The Clown, too, is a thoroughly unsavory fellow; his frivolities, as Andrew Lang says, "are coarse and stupid, even beyond the ordinary stupidity of Elizabethan horse-play." But this very coarseness serves a dramatic purpose, especially the banter in the first act. What Lavache says later on may be dismissed as rather poor comic relief. The Steward is about to reveal to the Countess that Helena is in love with her son, when the Clown thrusts himself into the company. He begs her to favor his marriage with her woman Isbel, and the Countess, allowing herself to be diverted by this licensed wit monger, listens to some pretty unsavory japes about marriage. The Steward then asks her to send the Clown to bid Helena come to her, and the Clown catches

up the name "Helen" with a reminiscence of Helen of Troy.

Was this fair face the cause, quoth she,
Why the Grecians sacked Troy?

ending with the reflection that there is one good woman in every ten, then reducing the number, on second thought.

One in ten, quoth a'! An we might have a good woman born but for every blazing star, or at an earthquake, 'twould mend the lottery well: a man may draw his heart out ere a' pluck one.

Countess You'll be gone, sir knave, and do as I command you!

Clown That man should be at woman's command, and yet no hurt done! Though honesty be no puritan, yet it will do no hurt; it will wear the surplice of humility over the black gown of a big heart. I am going, forsooth: the business is for Helen to come hither. *Exit.*

Dowden, in a passage which is sometimes quoted with approval, comments as follows: "A motto for the play may be found in the words uttered with pious astonishment by the clown, when his mistress bids him to begone, 'That man should be at woman's command, and yet no hurt done.' Helena is the providence of the play; and there is 'no hurt done,' but rather healing—healing of the body of the French king, healing of the spirit of the man she loves."⁵² The Clown's remark about man being at woman's command clearly refers, however, not only to the fact that the Countess is sending him off, but to what he has just been saying about good women in the world. The next sentence carries out this cynical jesting: Even if a chaste woman be no stickler for purity, she will do no harm; she will cloak her pride under humility.⁵³ The implication is: If Helen of Troy

⁵² *Shakspeare, a Critical Study of his Mind and Art*, 1881, p. 76.

⁵³ "Honesty" may mean either upright conduct, honorableness, decency, or chastity (Schmidt). Since the word is here used of woman, the meaning "chastity" seems most probable. "Puritan" has of course an unfavorable connotation in Shakspeare. "A big heart" signifies pride. "The puritans abominated the surplice as a rag of iniquity, and were great sticklers for the black gown, which was to them the symbol of Calvinism. Some of them, however, yielded so far as to wear the surplice over the gown, because their consciences would not suffer them to officiate without the latter, nor the law of the church without the former." (Herford, quoted by Brigstocke, in

acted as we know she did, why not Helen of Rousillon? Through the lips of the Clown we are given the cynical view of woman; the cheap and facile reproach that "chastity is no Puritan" is what might be expected of this "foul-mouthed and calumnious knave." The real beauty of devotion and sacrifice such as Helena exhibits, and the main theme of the piece illustrates, is set in sharp contrast to the view of the low-minded and vulgar. To make the Clown's words a motto for the play seems to me to miss their whole point; they are a motto, in the sense in which they are uttered, only in that the whole play contradicts them. The Clown is not so much moved by "pious astonishment" as by impertinent cynicism.

Much of the disagreeable atmosphere of the play, then, is due to the desire of the dramatist to contrast with the bright virtue of Helena the evil in the corrupt society about her, the weakness and badness of Bertram, the cowardice and treachery of Parolles, the vulgar cynicism of the Clown. So in *Measure for Measure*, the purity and nobility of Isabella are thrown into higher relief by the background of corrupt Vienna, with its bawdy-houses, panders, and libertines so much in evidence. In *Troilus and Cressida* and *Hamlet*, again, Shakspeare chose to dwell, in a somewhat different way, upon unpleasant characters and scenes for the sake of their effect upon the portraiture of the principal characters. We shall examine his method in these two plays more in detail in a moment. The important fact is that he adopted in all these problem plays a method which he had never

Arden ed., p. 31). I do not think the alternative explanation, making "honesty" refer to the Clown, is admissible: an honest man like myself, though he be no sanctimonious fellow, will do no hurt when woman's commands are laid upon him; he will cloak his pride under humility. The possibility of "doing hurt" in the opening sentence is clearly that woman might do it to man, not man to woman; the whole tenor of the Clown's preceding meditations shows that plainly enough.

before⁵⁴ employed in comedy or tragedy. Moreover, he seems to have deliberately selected plays which would lend themselves readily to this gloomier treatment.

How is this to be explained? Despite the dramatic effectiveness of these darker touches, are we to agree with Dowden and the many critics who have followed him that the gloomier atmosphere is a reflection of Shakspeare's personal feeling?⁵⁵ This theory has been frequently challenged in recent years, as for example by Neilson, in commenting upon Dowden's division of Shakspeare's artistic work into four categories: "In the Workshop," "In the World," "In the Depths," and "On the Heights."

In the terms used of the three later periods . . . there is an implication that the tone and mood of the plays in each are a direct reflection of the emotional experiences through which the poet himself was passing at the period of their composition. But this is to take for granted a theory of the relation between artist and production which has against it the general testimony of creator and critic alike. It is not at the pitch of an emotional experience that an artist successfully transmutes his life into art, but in retrospect, when his recollective imagination reproduces his mood in a form capable of being expressed without being dissipated. Of course, Shakespeare must have lived and enjoyed and suffered intensely; but this does not commit us to a belief in an immediate turning to account of personal experience in the writing of drama. His boy, Hamnet, died in 1596, about the time that

⁵⁴ The dates of the composition of the plays under discussion are of course largely conjectural. According to the editors of the *Tudor Shakespeare*, the best evidence points to the following results: *All's Well*, first written 1598 to 1600 or 1601, and reworked 1606-08; *Troilus and Cressida*, 1601-2, with some portions perhaps later; *Measure for Measure*, about 1602, with possible revision about 1604; *Hamlet*, Q1 1600, Q2 1602-04. For the "cheerful comedies," according to the same edition, we may accept these dates: *Taming of the Shrew*, 1594-7; *Much Ado*, 1599; *As You Like It* and *The Merry Wives*, 1599-1600; *Twelfth Night*, 1601.

⁵⁵ In this period "Shakespeare had known sorrow: his son was dead; his father died probably soon after Shakespeare had written his *Twelfth Night*; his friend of the *Sonnets* had done him wrong. Whatever the cause may have been, the fact seems certain that the poet now ceased to care for tales of mirth and love, for the stir and movement of history, for the pomp of war; he needed to sound, with his imagination, the depths of the human heart; to inquire into the darkest and saddest parts of human life; to study the great mystery of evil". (Dowden, *Shakespeare Primer*, p. 59)

he was writing *The Merchant of Venice* and the rollicking farce of *The Taming of the Shrew*, and just before he conceived Falstaff; it was fourteen years later that he gave us the pathetic figure of the young Mamillius in *The Winter's Tale*. From all that we know of his personal life, the years of *King Lear* and *Othello* were years of abounding prosperity. The *lacrimæ rerum* that touch the mind in these stupendous tragedies are the outcome of profound meditation and vivid imagination, not the accompaniment of a cry of instant pain. However we are to reconstruct the spiritual biography of Shakespeare, it is clear that it is by no such simple reading of his life in terms of his treatment of comic or tragic themes.⁶⁶

The solution offered by Neilson is that "the change in type of play perceptible from period to period is more safely to be explained by changes of theatrical fashion and public taste than by conjectures as to the inner life of the dramatist. I believe that a careful study of the problem plays confirms this explanation. The effect of contemporary theatrical fashions upon the plays written about the opening of the century has been particularly noted by Thorndike,⁶⁷ a recognized authority in this line of investigation, through his brilliant studies of the influence of Beaumont and Fletcher upon Shakspeare's dramatic romances. He observes that a reaction set in against romantic comedy and history near the close of the century, and that new tendencies became manifest.

⁶⁶ *The Facts about Shakespeare*, N. Y., 1913, pp. 84 ff. Note what is said of her cheerful work by Christine de Pisan, writing with a sad heart.

Je chante par couverture
 Mais mieulx plourasset mi oeil,
 Ne nul ne scet le traveil
 Que mon pouvre cuer endure.

 Pour ce plainte ne murmure
 Ne fais de mon piteux dueil.
 Ainçois ris quant plourer vueil,
 Et sans rime et sanz mesure
 Je chante par couverture.

(Cited by Petit de Julleville, *Historie de la Langue et de la Littérature Française*, Paris, 1896, II, 360.)

⁶⁷ *Loc. cit.*, p. 103.

Comedy tended to become more realistic and satiric. Chapman, Marston, Middleton, and Jonson, all began writing romantic comedy, but changed shortly to realistic. Jonson, in *Every Man in His Humour* (1598), announced his opposition to the lawless drama which had preceded—whether romantic comedy or chronicle history—and proposed the creation of a new satirical comedy of manners. He was moved partly by a desire to break from past methods in order to bring comedy closer to classical example, and partly by a desire for realism, a faithful presentation, analysis, and criticism of current manners. The growth of London and the increase in luxury and immorality seem to have encouraged such a movement, and for the decade after 1598 there were many comedies of London life, mostly satiric, and nearly all realistic. Many varieties are to be found, from gross representation of the seamy side of city life to serious discussion of social questions, and from sympathetic picturing of certain trades to satiric exposure of the evils of society.

Professor Thorndike informs me that he has never worked out this important matter in detail, and I do not know of any study which has done so. Such analysis would carry us far beyond the limits of the present investigation,⁵⁸ but the main issues must be noted.

The contemporary theatrical fashions just emphasized appear in the problem plays of Shakspeare mainly in gloomily realistic treatment of romantic stories, and in the selection of such themes as would lend themselves to this treatment. Shakspeare did not turn, like Dekker or Heywood, to naturalistic representation of scenes of contemporary life, nor, like Jonson or Middleton, to satiric lashing of the vices of the times. He satisfied the current demand for exposure of human weaknesses by sharply realistic treatment of tales which by their very nature are not realistic at all, and at the same time contrived to make his plots more effective by deepening the shadows. In *Measure for Measure*, the darkly etched Hogarthian figures in the brothels of Vienna contrast sharply with the improbabilities of the action, the sudden wickedness and sudden repentance of Angelo, the masquerading of the Duke, the old-wives-tale episode of the substituted bride, and the like, while at the same time throwing the purity of Isabella into higher relief. In *Troilus and*

⁵⁸ I hope later to publish a more extended study of the problem plays.

Cressida the grimly disillusionized picture of the Greek and Trojan camps and of the false love of Cressida is in quite a different key from the artificial romanticism and chivalric apparatus of the play, both in the machinery of courtly love in the main plot, and the parade of military heroics elsewhere. *Hamlet*, an old melodramatic story, is transformed, despite its romantic setting in the Elsinore of long ago, into a biting picture of a rotten court, in times which are "out of joint." The tragedy of an essentially noble soul, like Hamlet, faced with the dreadful duty of revenge, is deepened by his heartsick disgust at the corruption about him. In *All's Well*, as we have just seen, an essentially romantic and unrealistic plot is made striking and plausible by realistic emphasis upon the vicious characters of the story it portrays, so that the devotion and goodness of the heroine shine forth all the more clearly.

In all these plays I believe that the telling of a familiar romantic story for the story's own sake was Shakspeare's prime object, just as it was in *Much Ado* or *As You Like It*. He had occasionally worked earlier with plots which would have lent themselves admirably to the more realistic and gloomy method which we have just noted. How easily *Much Ado* might have been so treated! But the accusation of unchastity against Hero and the sinister figure of Don John are completely overshadowed by the brilliant wit of Benedick and Beatrice, and the merry-making at the court in Messina. If in such a play as *All's Well* Shakspeare chose to paint a romantic subject with the brush of a Rembrandt rather than of a Rubens, the ultimate artistic purpose seems to be no different. This was to tell an interesting and moving story of a heroine passing through great afflictions which have a happy issue at the end. There was no change in the main point of the tale, however much the details might be altered. Shakspeare followed absolutely in traditional lines, making a play exalting the virtue of Helena out of existing literary and dramatic material which had presented this sorely-tried lady as doing what she conceived to

be right. He did the same thing for Isabella in *Measure for Measure*. *Hamlet* follows in its main features the lines laid down by Kyd, so far as we can judge, and the fashion of contemporary revenge tragedies. The power of tradition upon Shakspeare is most strikingly shown in *Troilus and Cressida*. Cressida was to the Elizabethans a wanton. Shakspeare could not make her a heroine. But the plot, by its very nature, gave such admirable opportunities for the gloomy realism then in vogue, that Shakspeare told the story just as his age interpreted it. The issue of the plot was not of his making.

The problem plays, then, were written with the solutions fixed in advance, and fixed by the convictions of the Elizabethan Age. Shakspeare was free to alter the details, to make Helena's husband a cad, to alter Isabella's relations with Angelo, and doubtless to reconstruct much in *Hamlet* (the absence of the immediate source makes it impossible to speak with confidence), but not to whitewash Cressida or blacken Helena or Isabella or keep Hamlet alive at the end. I have urged this point at some length in discussions of other plays.⁵⁹ Only by a realization of it, I believe, can the artistic purpose of Shakspeare be fully understood.

It has been repeatedly said by critics, however, that the impelling force behind such plays as *All's Well* and *Measure for Measure* was irony, that Shakspeare chose to make of Helena and Isabella women whose show of virtue covers the gravest faults of character and conduct. This view seems to be holding its own bravely at the present time. An anonymous writer, in a leading article in a recent number of the *London Times Literary Supplement*,⁶⁰ expresses himself as follows: "The treatment of love in [*Measure for Measure*] is as near to pure cynicism as Shakespeare could get. . . . Whatever may be the dramatic purpose of this singular 'comedy,' the condition of mind from which it

⁵⁹ See articles on *Cymbeline* and *Troilus and Cressida* already referred to. Schücking has independently emphasized the same thought, pp. 9-10.

⁶⁰ October 31, 1921 (No. 1030) p. 650.

sprang is manifest. Life is hateful and contemptible, and as for love, your bawd is your only honest man. In *All's Well that Ends Well*—supremely cynical title—Shakespeare seems deliberately to take revenge on his own idealism of love. He deliberately makes Bertram detestable and shows that the bragging coward Parolles is the better man. Then he makes Helena fall in love, passionately, tenderly, delicately, with the unpleasant young nobleman, builds her up as surely as Beatrice or Rosalind, puts into her mouth the divinely hesitating reply to Bertram's purely brutal 'What would you have?'

Something, and scarce so much: nothing, indeed.

I would not tell what I would, my lord.

Faith, yes.

Strangers and foes do sunder, and not kiss.

Yet after all this she plays the Mariana trick. One wonders what can be the conception of the poet in the minds of those who imagine that he had written a romantic comedy with a happy ending. The self-torturing mood of the play, the bitter mood of 'I'll show you a happy ending,' is only too apparent."

The present essay has been written partly to show the fallacy of such a view of the problem plays as this. It will be observed that this view assumes a direct break with earlier tradition. No one will maintain, I think, after the evidence of the preceding pages, that there was any ironical intent in the mind of Boccaccio or of the other tellers of the *All's Well* story in its earlier forms. No one will maintain, in considering the theme of *Measure for Measure*, that the heroine of Cinthio or Whetstone was meant to be a caricature of female virtue. Whetstone's position is neatly summed up in three lines given to the King.⁶¹

Cassandra, take comfort in care, be of good cheere:

Thy forced fault was free from evil intent.

So long, no shame can blot thee any way.

⁶¹ *Historie of Promos and Cassandra*, Part II, Act III, Scene 2.

The psychology is clumsy, but the main issue is clear: Cassandra makes a great and noble sacrifice to save her brother. We have already seen that, in both parts of the plot of *All's Well*, the actions of the heroine are to be considered virtuous in the light of the immediate source and of the medieval analogs. If we agree with Masefield and other critics whose views have been quoted already, we must assume that Shakspeare, for his own artistic purposes, deliberately altered the whole purport of the play. The situation with *Measure for Measure* is precisely the same.

It is of the highest importance to recognize that Shakspeare was not free, as is a dramatist or novelist of today, to make such sweeping changes in the meaning of traditional stories, in situations made familiar to people by centuries of oral narrative. In modern times, Anatole France is at liberty to turn the tale of Bluebeard inside out, and maintain, with the touches of delightful satire with which his readers are well acquainted, that Bluebeard "fut bon et malheureux, et que sa mémoire succomba sous d'indignes calomnies." In *Die Jungfrau von Orleans*, Schiller could make the glorious maid die on the battlefield, rather than at the stake. But does anyone seriously suppose that Shakspeare could do this sort of thing? He was writing, not for a public which delighted in clever perversions of familiar tales, like the readers of Anatole France, nor for a public which had forgotten medieval traditions, like the spectators of Schiller's plays in the eighteenth century. He could not have made a wanton out of Helena any more than he could have made Richard III kill Richmond on the battlefield. He had to make his appeal to the lower classes as well as to the more cultured, in order to insure the success of his theatrical ventures. A very considerable part of his audience were people of no education or literary training, but with a good acquaintance with traditional story. They looked to the stage to tell them the tales which they knew, and resented, just as children do today, any radical alterations. A perversion of old folk-tale situations, like those in *All's Well*, would

merely have perplexed and baffled them. The case was quite different with plays like *Bartholomew Fair* or *The Alchemist*, which did not involve situations of this sort. When Shakspeare chose to satirize love, he did it in quite another fashion than by the irony which critics find in *All's Well*,—in incidentals which do not affect the main romantic plot, as in *Twelfth Night*, or in a court piece, like *Love's Labor's Lost*. But even in the latter play he did not take a familiar story and stand it on its head. The plot is perfectly straightforward, not ironical. What traces of irony there are lie in the dialog and characterization. Only in *Troilus and Cressida*, which by its very nature is an exposure of the hollowness of love-making, did he undertake the perversion of a romantic tale. But, as has so often been emphasized here, that treatment was not of his own choice. From the point of view of his own time, it was not perversion.

Ironical intent in a play is exceedingly difficult to disprove—or to prove. Nothing is easier than to make it seem plausible to the modern reader, who forgets the source and the social and dramatic conventions of Shakspeare's own day. I do not imagine that anyone would call *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* "as near to pure cynicism as Shakespeare could get" in the treatment of love. Yet it is very easy to make out a case for it, by the methods of the critics who discover this in *All's Well*. As thus: Valentine is the hero of the play. Yet,—supremely cynical touch!—he is willing to throw over Silvia, who has sacrificed everything for him, on account of a Quixotic devotion to Proteus. And Proteus is equally willing to throw over Julia. This is what love amounts to, in Shakspeare's mind.—The true answer to such a theory is, of course, that the play is built in medieval fashion about the virtue of friendship, according to which the perfect friend must sacrifice everything, including his lady-love, to the demands of this virtue, and that this exaggerated affection of one man for another, which seems to us today so absurd, was still a potent force in Shakspeare's

time. The focus of the play is not on love at all, but on friendship. A student of mine recently spoke of the "fine irony" of the erection of golden statues to Romeo and Juliet by their afflicted kinsfolk at the end of the play. One needs only to observe that the Montagues and Capulets put up a costly tomb, in the source from which Shakspeare chiefly drew. Arthur Brooke will hardly be credited, I imagine, with introducing "fine irony" at this point. In his view, the suffering families were doing what they could,

. . . lest that length of time might from our minds remove
The memory of so perfect, sound, and so approvèd love.

Tennyson's lines at the end of *Enoch Arden*,

And when they buried him the little port
Had seldom seen a costlier funeral,

seem, with that delicious word "costly," somewhat out of key. There are reasons enough for thinking that the poet would not have allowed irony to intrude upon pathos at this point. But who can *prove* it, one way or the other? So one cannot prove that ironical intent does not exist in the plays which we have been discussing, but still less can one prove that it does. The burden of proof, with so direct and straightforward a writer as Shakspeare is in general, seems to me to lie upon those who would seek to establish the presence of irony in *All's Well* and *Measure for Measure*.

A happy ending was imposed upon Shakspeare for the relations of Helena and Bertram by the traditions of the story. The reconciliation is managed, however, with singular abruptness, as is often the case with Shakspeare's final unravelling of the tangled fortunes of his characters. He seems to have been far more interested in their trials than in their deliverances. Perhaps he recognized that an audience is likely to lose interest when the end of the piece has obviously arrived,—we all know the restlessness in the modern theater in the last five minutes of the average play. But the same hurried endings appear also in the work of great masters of prose narrative. Andrew Lang, in commenting

upon the novels of Scott, speaks of "the haste of fatigue which set him, as Lady Louisa Stuart often told him, on 'huddling up a conclusion anyhow, and so kicking the book out of his way.' In this matter of *dénouements* he certainly was no more careful than Shakespeare or Molière."⁶² Whatever be the cause of it, the hurried ending does not, to my mind, alter the impression that things have really come out right. Virtue triumphs in the end over the baser elements in human nature; the purity and devotion of Helena shame the cruelty and neglect of Bertram, and the vulgar cynicism of railers against women like the Clown. In the sub-plot the cowardice and treachery of Parolles are exposed in their full ugliness. Even if the Devil mutters behind the leaves "supremely cynical title," the play *was* named *All's Well that Ends Well*, and the closing couplet echoes the thought.

All yet seems well; and if it end so meet,
The bitter past, more welcome is the sweet.

WILLIAM WITHERLE LAWRENCE

⁶² Introduction to *Waverly*, Boston, 1892, p. lxxxiv.